What are stepfathers’ experiences of their position/role within the family?

Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy

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In Memory of Brian Traynor

15th September 1948 - 22nd April 2008

This research project is dedicated to my Pa, Brian Traynor, our breath of fresh air, with my endless love and thanks for ‘being there.’
I would like to sincerely thank the three stepfathers who have generously given hours of their time; who have allowed me access to their thoughts, feelings and lived experience and who have allowed me to hear their story; one that is rarely told or heard.

I would also like to thank the staff and students of the ‘Tavi’ for their support, and good humour. Particular thanks go to Reenee Singh who offered endless wisdom, patience, encouragement and tissues. Reenee, without you, this research would never have been completed.

Statement of confidentiality: Every effort has been made to respect the confidentiality of the participants in the study. Initials only are used and key personal, identifying details have been omitted.
Over the past thirty years, much has been learnt about the different kinds of stepfamilies that exist. Early research understood stepfamily life as problematic and it overlooked the more successful aspects contained within these families, including the finding that most members are satisfied with stepfamily life and most step children do well.

For this study, I interviewed three stepfathers and all semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The literature review, although limited contained three main areas: stepfamilies that enter therapy, the comparisons in relationships between stepchildren and stepfathers and biological fathers and the implications of re-marriage and stepfamily life. Only one paper referred exclusively to the relationship between stepfathers and stepchildren and what is particularly overlooked is the contribution stepfathers make to family life (Kelly, 1993); their views on their role and that of family members.

This study, which aimed to explore stepfathers’ experiences of their role within the family, found that stepfathers seem to understand and perform their roles through the prism of a maternal terrain which privileges the role of mother. This role is constructed by a powerful social discourse which can limit the possibility of greater involvement between stepfather and child and privilege biological relational ties which can question the status and legitimacy of a ‘step’ relationship. Despite this, stepfathers struggle to expand the narrow confines of their role, searching for closeness and
intimacy in a way that is hard to language and difficult to understand by the men themselves and society generally.

**Keywords:** Stepfamilies, stepfather, role, support, relationships, stepchildren.
Close bonds between stepfathers and stepchildren is associated with better child outcomes (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001)

“I think I just tried to make us a family” (Brian Traynor, 19th April 2008, 3 days before his death)

The main reason for my interest in the role of the stepfather and how it is perceived is my relationship with Brian Traynor, my late stepfather. Since his death four years ago, I have reflected a great deal on our relationship; his contribution and legacy and his role and place within the family. As well as this, my interest in the stepfather role and his position within the family has been brought in to focus at work. For 11 years I have been a learning mentor in a primary school in central London and in my work, although we engage increasingly with fathers who will attend meetings to discuss concerns about their child, we rarely, if ever, interact with stepfathers and regrettably we perhaps omit to invite them to meet with us. To redress this, during my training at the Tavistock Centre, where I again had the privilege of engaging with a number of fathers, my invitations to families to bring the child’s stepfather to our sessions were not taken up.

When I first thought about an area of study for this dissertation, I considered writing about the impact of the absent father and the legacy of loss that this can potentially engender in children. The ‘absent father’ would have spoken to my own experience of being separated from and living without my biological father from a young age. His departure was not mourned within the family as he had been abusive to my mother and an unreliable and inconsistent father to my younger sister and me. His leaving was discussed by the adult women in the family as a positive event and any deleterious
impact of his absence on his children was not thought about for many years, as the only one who was thought to have truly suffered at his hands (literally) was my mother.

My mother, who had been a teenager when I was born, thought that her mother, as the strong and capable matriarch that she was, would be better placed to care for me. Compared to the warm and totalising love that my grandmother provided, my mother viewed herself as a poor substitute and she felt that I would only have need of her mother and no-one else.

Within my predominately matriarchal family system there seemed to be a paucity of thought regarding the place of men and as such the role of any male in our family was tenuous to say the least. Men in general seemed to be missing either physically or as an active presence from the family and yet, throughout my early childhood I felt the absence of and a yearning for the presence of a father; though a very different one to my own.

Before the arrival of my stepfather to our family when I was 8 years old, my grandfather was the only man in the family. Despite my own positive relationship with him, he presented as a largely marginalised, distant and insignificant figure who had been displaced in my grandmother’s affections by the arrival of first their children and then me. His demotion within the family was my promotion and I became a pivotal figure to my grandmother and the family system. Perhaps I sensed, even as a young child that a stronger male presence might have rebalanced and re-ordered the strong, albeit loving matriarchal set-up, thus freeing me from the position of being my grandmother’s focus and companion.

I remember vividly the day that Brian Traynor was introduced to my sister, me, my grandmother (I don’t recall my grandfather being there) and my uncle and aunt who were visiting. When he walked in, I remember feeling a
pang of empathy as I considered how it must be for him to enter a room full of strangers who were sitting there expectantly. Perhaps an awareness that men tended not to fare too well within this family heightened my concern that this sea of powerful women might see him off. As Brian stood there, looking every inch Mr 1972, with his long wavy auburn hair and Afghan fleece, a ripple of laughter greeted him, which soon became louder and more raucous by the minute. My anxiety rose as I wondered how this man would deal with ritual humiliation. Brian remained there, calmly, benevolently, eyes twinkling and promptly joined in with laughter of his own. He was at once a breath of fresh air and a steady, safe and wise presence that would remain with us and sustain us as a family until the day he died.

Given the nurturing, constant presence of my stepfather, I have to consider why my initial focus for this research would be on paternal loss and absence. Perhaps my attention to the loss of my father and the omitting of my stepfather was isomorphic with a wider societal discourse which pits both figures against each other, allowing only one to be accorded the ‘proper’ paternal role, which then enjoys privilege and status over the other. Perhaps stepfathers also fall foul to a linguistic system within which our gender but also our social identity is already structured. As Lacan states, language ‘expects’ us; we are already positioned within its grid as ‘son’ or ‘daughter’, ‘father’ or ‘mother’ (Morris, 1993). ‘Stepfather’ may continue to exist outside of this linguistic structure of meaning and is thus deemed unfamiliar and untrustworthy; perhaps needing to be relegated or ignored.

Stepfathers are rarely utilised as major characters in films or stories, contrary to the ubiquitous wicked stepmother of Greek legend and fairy stories. Where they do appear, stepfathers are invariably malevolent and in the news and media, negative stories abound of acts of deviance and abuse as they wreak havoc with the lives of those family members that they have
access to. Rarely is a stepfather credited with bringing a healthy, positive contribution to the family system that he enters.

An internet search for stepfathers in film produced four examples: The Night of the Hunter (1955), The Stepfather (1987), This Boy’s Life (1993) and Pan’s Labyrinth (1996). In a recent updated version of The Night of the Hunter, entitled rather unimaginatively but pointedly, The Stepfather (2009), the film portrays a man who works hard to gain the trust of a beguiled single mother, only to abuse her children who had had their own misgivings from the start. In Pan’s Labyrinth, there is the portrayal of possibly the vilest stepfather imaginable, Captain Vidal, a cruel sociopath and fascist murderer of freedom fighters who eventually captures and murders his own stepdaughter, whilst seeking to preserve the life of his own biological child. Each of these films reveals the stepfather to be an overriding evil character, capable of being a violent drunk or a serial killer who can descend into the sexual and physical abusive of those whose care he is entrusted with.

An internet search for stepfathers in literature produced only stepmothers within this genre, although perhaps one of the most famous literary stepfathers is Vladimir Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert, whose unhealthy passion for his 12 year old stepdaughter is portrayed vividly and controversially in his 1955 novel Lolita.

Perhaps it is no wonder that powerful stepfather representations such as these can both inform and be informed by, cultural and societal narratives which proffer a similarly negative tone and outlook. This study attempts to move beyond the narrow and damaging depictions of stepfathers that are prevalent in some of the academic literature and which continue to malign them, in order to access a different story.
LITERATURE REVIEW

“Family research which continues to think in terms of nuclear families and suggests by amassing data on them that they are not subject to change will someday find itself on the shelf beside the other curious products of a blind empiricism.” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:150)

The rationale for this research is primarily to give a voice to those who are not normally heard. From the fairly limited literature that I have sourced that refers to stepfathers at all, only one paper and two books include an interview with a stepfather, voicing his experience. The rest, from the fields of family research and sociology, report on the stepfather/stepfamily experience and from this I draw out the key themes of ‘role’, ‘relationships’ and ‘societal discourse’ which I believe will provide a context and backdrop for my interviews with three stepfathers. I shall conclude the review with papers that suggest what may be helpful therapeutically for stepfamilies and the implications this may have for best practice in systemic psychotherapy.

‘Family Background’

Up until relatively recently, there has been a dearth of empirical research on remarriage and stepfamilies (Clingempeel, Ievoli & Brand, 1984) and what there has been, tends to frame stepfamilies as incomplete institutions (Pryor, 2008) or indeed as inherently problematic (Papernow, 1993). Perhaps this negative outlook on stepfamilies emerges from a discourse that sees the end of marriage per se as intrinsically wrong and detrimental to all concerned. Indeed, Smart and Neale suggest that for much of the decade that preceded their book there was an emergent orthodoxy that depicted the family as being in moral decline with parents being blamed for the harms of divorce (Smart & Neale, 1999). Perhaps then, new partners, who are seen to be
‘stepping in’ to the aftermath of divorce, may face similar if not greater opprobrium.

Studies directed at the role of the stepfather have also been limited and it is only since the mid-1970’s that the importance of the role been recognised (Halperin & Smith, 1983).

Much of the research that exists however appears to rely on cold, scientific, empirical evidence which pays scant attention to what men are actually saying about their experience. This literature, particularly from the 1980s and 90s, tends to focus on the deficits of stepfathers and their negative impact on their stepchildren’s well-being and attainment. As such, I have discounted its inclusion here as I deem it to be unhelpful and irrelevant to my own research task.

More recent research however, suggests a more positive outlook, as it discovers that most stepchildren fare well with stepparents and with stepfathers in particular (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001, White and Gilbreth, 2001 et al). Despite this tribute to their fathering, I can find little evidence of stepfathers’ voices being accessed and utilised within this research to attest to this. Perhaps nomenclature may explain the cultural beginnings of the pervasive absence of the stepfather. The prefix “step” comes from the old English “steop” meaning “bereaved” or “orphaned” (Visher and Visher, 1979), which of course means to be deprived of something; namely a father.

**Stepping in to the role**

In Angela Carter’s novel Wise Children (1991), she tells of septuagenarian twins whose paternity is permanently under dispute. Paraphrasing Shakespeare, one character declares that ‘It’s a wise child that knows its own father…’ but for Carter and finally for the twins, the concept of family and father are de-naturalised, no longer an automatic given, but something
constructed out of affection and a sense of responsibility towards others. In this, she seeks not so much to render the father (and family) as extraneous or unnecessary but rather, as a role that one has to work hard for the right to play (Gamble, 1997).

Given the complexities of parenthood and the changing roles within, how does a stepfather play a role that is so ambiguous and ill-defined and one that he may struggle in as he attempts to accomplish tasks for which he has had no preparation? “Since social roles are learned, no step-relationship can be instantly defined or successful and alongside this, stepfather prejudice that he doesn’t count for very much and his role is amorphous, must be overcome” (Visher and Visher, 1979 p.88).

In the 1980’s, the role of the stepfather was seen specifically as that of a substitute father, with re-marriage the best possible solution to divorce which posed a threat to the well-being of the nuclear family. However, as sociologists Smart and Neale contend, “If a biological father stays involved with his children, the mother’s new husband or partner cannot become a substitute father. He therefore has to find a different role in relation the children (Smart and Neale, 1999 p.72).” They add that tensions arise when a new man insists on becoming a ‘proper’ father to the children of an involved biological father and where “a mother and her new partner envisage that they are reconstituting a nuclear family.” (Smart and Neale, 1999, p.101).

The authors suggest that a distinction is required from the ‘old expectations of step parenting.’ In their research, they include many contributions from divorced parents who “made it clear that the new partner would not be a new father to their children…would not be called ‘dad’, nor would he discipline…rather he would co-exist and develop a certain kind of companionship with them.” They add, “Men unable to adopt this new type of adult-child relationship could be given short shrift.” (Smart and Neale,
Perhaps Marsiglio (2004) puts it better when he describes stepfathers as “entering a complicated ‘family dance’…requiring them to negotiate their place in their partner’s life, the child’s life and often the lives of the biological father and his relatives.”

In an otherwise excellent book, the author’s stance on post-divorce parenting appears myopic; stepfathers are barely mentioned or accorded a title; they are referred to simply as ‘mother’s husband or partner’ throughout and this may be because they focus on the possibility rather than the actuality of step parent entry. I accept that my own desire to amplify the stepfather position overly informs my reading as I bristle at his continued absence in the literature, but I was left with a sense that the book, which provides a fresh understanding on the nature of family practice and the fluid and diverse patterns of parenthood that emerge from it, may itself be privileging the divorced couple, with an implication that they, as biological parents have the most to contribute to the child’s well-being. Perhaps it is unhelpful to superimpose any family map on the stepfamily terrain (Bernstein, 1999).

**The Stepfather relationship: ‘Being There’**

“In acquiring stepfathers, children add an effective parent” (White and Gilbreth, 2001)

In *Growing Up in Stepfamilies*, the authors cite the views of an adult stepdaughter who describes her relationship with her stepfather: “In one sense I never thought of him as me dad, but then again, I thought he was me dad…Because he was there…He’s been there so long, since I was so young that it seems natural.” (Gorell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, and Burchardt, 1997 p.204). For many adult stepchildren, they suggest, the importance of the stepfather “being there,” of being a presence which gradually came to be
depended upon, although often unacknowledged at the time, was voiced again and again and was often contrasted with the absence of the biological father, a fact that some researchers would see as a disadvantage or indeed harmful for the children concerned.

White and Gilbreth (2001) in their study of the effects of stepfather and non-custodial fathers on adolescent outcomes, conclude that whereas a good relationship with a father probably has positive effects these effects are weaker than those associated with a good relationship with a stepfather. The authors suggest that “the effect of noncustodial fathers’ relationships depends less on current contact than on years since father and child lived together.” (White and Gilbreth, 2001. p165) The fact of a stepfather’s presence (my italics) within a positive relationship appears to have meaningful independent positive effect on a child’s outcomes and is particularly important to adolescent outcomes. Therefore, the primacy of residency theory in the literature appears to win out as studies show that co-residing with a child and being available on a daily basis, sees the social capital between stepchild and stepfather realised (King, 2006).

Research also shows that the quality of relationship with stepfathers and its positive effect on childhood outcomes is not dependent on the child’s quality of relationship with the noncustodial father or their contact with him; rather, as this study reports, “good relationships with noncustodial fathers are actually higher in stepfamilies than in families where the mother is not in union.” (White and Gilbreth, 2001. p164). Furthermore, a father’s frequent contact with children not living with him did not appear to detract from their relationship with a stepfather (Bernstein, 1999). Here, studies indicate that the relationship between fathers and stepfathers is possibly less competitive and more collaborative than one might expect with both supportive of each others role. Ultimately though, research shows that where there are two
fathers, children are more likely to be closer their stepfathers than to their non resident fathers (White and Gilbreth, 2001).

Stepfamilies report that successful family life occurs where relationships are formed slowly and respectfully among members, with flexibility and spousal agreement being key part to negotiating family and parenting roles and where there is no immediate assumption of a disciplinary role, but rather one of warmth and support (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham, 2004). Perhaps it is negotiations such as these and the sensitivity that goes with it, that cause stepchildren to view themselves as being just as happy as other children. For stepfathers, having to be sensitive negotiators may make them more aware of their role within the family unit and to try harder than natural fathers to be effective in this role (Visher and Visher, 1979).

In considering what constitutes successful stepfather/child relationships, one study concludes that it appears not to matter if the stepfather has or does not have children of his own, “contrary to predictions, simple (no children) and complex (own children) stepfather families did not differ on the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationship…and complex stepfathers experienced minimal loyalty conflicts.” (Clingempeel, Ievoli & Brand, 1984). There appears to be little difference in parental involvement even when biological and stepchildren are living in the same household; what appears to be important is shared residency with regard to father involvement (Sweeney, 2010). Indeed, when asked, the majority of youth living with a stepfather report having a high quality relationship (King, 2006).

Barack Obama, in his autobiography, laments the lack of time he had with his stepfather: “Like many men today I grew up without a father in the house. There were men in my life – a stepfather with whom I lived for four years and my grandfather…both good men. But my relationships with them were necessarily partial, incomplete. In the case of my stepfather this was a
result of limited duration and his natural reserve.” (Obama, 2008 p.346).
There is a suggestion here of a longing for a male presence, but Obama goes on to pay tribute to the maternal figures in his life who he thanks for ‘being there.’

For Visher and Visher, a stepfather’s attempt at becoming a friend first to his stepchildren is crucial, alongside knowing when to hold back and take a slow, easy pace. Here, the authors cite the experience of a stepfather: “My stepson felt I was pushing. I tried too hard. So I backed away and for about two years a state of neutrality existed, and now at last some friendliness between us is beginning to develop.” (Visher & Visher, 1979 p.97). It may be that this exchange is affected by gender; perhaps males are socialised to be warier of relational closeness and intimacy than females. However, some of the literature views the relationships between stepfathers and stepdaughters as more problematic (Clingempeel, Ievoli and Brand, 1984) but most of the literature makes little or no distinction between the two.

**Context & Society**

**Cost of divorce**

“When families dissolve, the average standard of living for mothers and children fall as much as 60%. When we focus on the highly speculative psychological effects of fatherlessness we draw away from concrete political concerns, like the role of poverty.” (Real, 1997 p.141).

Stepfamily life, like family life in general, is always continuous with other areas of existence such as work, family, politics, economics and so on. As I have stated, much of the concern of prior family research has focused on the difficulties facing children of divorced parents but this marks a shift of focus from socio-economic to psychological considerations. As poverty issues have been overlooked so the spotlight has fallen instead on the lack of a
‘proper’ father and its implications (Silva and Smart, 1999). Studies that focus on stepchildren who live with stepfathers doing ‘less well’ than they might have done with both biological parents, do not adequately take into account the mine field of difficulties that can mark the end of a marriage, including the difficulties of being a single parent household that Real (1997) speaks of and into which a stepfather enters.

Unlike a first marriage, a second marriage may carry the spectre of loss for one or both partners and their children. The family system that men as new husbands and stepfathers enter can often be redolent with a child’s pain at the loss of a resident parent, which in turn, can be a reminder to the family of multiple losses that they may have undergone. The diminished circumstances of a single mother and her children and the nebulous area of financial responsibilities may create stresses at the outset of a new union and a stepfather may find that he stands in the midst of a family for whom finances have become a metaphor for love, control and unresolved issues from the past (Pasley, Rhoden, Visher and Visher, 1996). Socio-economic resources are held to be important factors in determining the levels of involvement that a stepfather will have with his stepchildren; this and also his own education. Race and immigration appear not to determine levels of involvement and close bonds, but other factors that may impact on closeness include co-habitation rather than marriage and a poor mother/child relationship (King, 2006).

Indeed, mothers according to some of the literature can be instrumental in determining levels of closeness between stepfathers and children, as they “play an important gate keeping role in shaping the stepfather’s involvement by encouraging or restricting… access to their children” (King, 2006 p.913). However, the same can be said of ‘intact’ households, where father involvement with their children is thought to be sustained through the relationship with the mother; in effect, he does not have an independent
relationship with them and his role is supportive to hers (Smart and Neale, 1999). Perhaps more intense and complex negotiations may be required from stepfathers who wish to be close to their stepchildren if this is the case or perhaps this change to a family system can bring with it a desire to parent differently and re-define reified biological roles.

**Language and the role**

If, as post-modernists and social constructionists hold, the individual is a relational being, located in wider systems of interaction, conversation and meaning and defined by those multiple conversations, dialogues, stories and relationships that they enter into (Larner, 2008) then an appreciation of these as a context for our understanding of stepfathers (and stepfamilies) may be necessary. *How* we speak about ‘family’ and ‘stepfamilies,’ ‘fathers’ and ‘stepfathers’ and even marriage and divorce, may need to be deconstructed as it “is a discourse that imposes a way of thinking, knowing or speaking, forcing a choice between this or that paradigm. This can be totalising or violent.” (Larner, p352).

The privileging of ‘intact’ families and their biological ties inevitably impacts negatively on stepfamilies and how they are perceived (Adler-Baeder and Hibbinbotham, 2004)

**Legal status**

There is consistent evidence of a lack of socio-cultural and positive opinion regarding remarriage and stepfamilies, as well as a paucity of policy and legal practice which seeks to recognise familial relationships between stepparents and stepchildren.

Contemporary stepfamilies continue to have ambiguous status under U.S law, which sees parental status as limited to two adults at one time. Legal ambiguity continues to surround issues of custodial authority and affects a
stepparents custodial and visitation rights after the partnership ends. Financial support and inheritance rights generally, remain a grey area, with stepparents regarded as “third parties” and often, written permission from a biological parent is required when stepparents are dealing with a variety of institutions (Sweeney, 2010). If stepfamilies are framed as ‘incomplete institutions’ the focus remains on their deficits rather than their strength and resilience (Pryor 2008).

The stepfather in the room

In a paper on stepfamily education programmes (Skogrand, Davis and Higginbotham, 2011), a stepfather’s voice is finally included. ‘Mark’ tells of feeling “in a vacuum” and there being “nobody out there to talk to” (p.66). The value of the programme for Mark’s family lay in helping them feel less alone by connecting them with other stepfamilies and sharing thoughts on how to move away from the deficit ideas and models of stepfamilies that they were surrounded by. Mark discovered that his family did not fit a typical mould for stepfamily success, hence: “we can define ourselves; we don’t have to follow anybody’s example or model.” He recognises, alongside other stepparents, the uniqueness of his family and universal theories are dispensed with. Mark goes on to add that with regard to their step and biological children, “the biggest thing is looking at each child as a separate and unique individual.” Bringing in voices such as this to the academic literature and the consulting room is illuminating and vital and provides rich texture to our understanding not only of stepfather and stepfamily experience, but perhaps the interior lives of men generally.

Implications for family therapy

Stepfamilies often come to therapy with troubled, hurt or angry, accounts of family life. They may also come with experiences that may not correlate
with previous expectations and with a prevailing family ideology of “life as it ought to be lived” (Bernstein, 1999).

A 1996 study, drawn from the Stepfamily Association of America, cites what it believes constitutes successful therapy for stepfamilies. It speaks of the need for therapists to ‘validate and normalise’ the diverse experiences of stepfamilies and to attend to the complexity of the stepparent role in particular. The families spoke of a lack of role clarity and the unidentified rights and responsibilities of a stepparent (Pasley, Rhoden, Visher & Visher, 1996). A therapist may be helpful then, in eliciting from the family a set of realistic expectations regarding the time it may take to establish these new roles and to point out that many stepfamilies speak of several years of turbulence before relationships are formed (Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham, 2004). For many ordinary stepfamilies they find that there is neither ‘instant love’ nor the stepfamily life of legends and dark fairy tales.

Perhaps then, a key task for a therapist working with a stepfamily is to think about how to liberate clients who have been “captured” by disabling, impoverished stories of stepfamily life (Bernstein, 1999). The therapeutic stance implied here although narrative in tone, is a feature of systemic, culturally sensitive therapy generally and is one that is “respectful, collaborative and non-hierarchical…one that encourages the expression of multiple ideas and possibilities; avoids blame or pathologising; searches for strengths rather than defects…and fosters transparency on the part of the therapist” (McGoldrick, 1998). Perhaps we must work especially hard to include those who see their role within family life as auxiliary.

In her study that seeks to engage men in therapy, Dienhart (2001) explores whether the gender of the therapist impacts on men’s willingness to engage. Her conclusions are that research suggests it does not. What appears to matter most, given that male and female therapists can privilege different
aspects of gender issues, is that gender-aware therapy “brings the husband /
father (stepfathers) in from the periphery” (p.33). Therapists of both genders
felt that they should be taught material that speaks of male socialisation and
that they need to be mindful of their own gender socialisation.

Walters, Tasker and Bichard (2001) also refer in their study to the
‘peripheral father’ in the context of western society. Once involved in
therapy sessions however, these men offer “indispensable sources of
information about their children” (p.5), despite fathers seeing themselves as
a “secondary partner.” They suggest that for men who find it difficult to talk
about feelings, talking of loss of their own parents, not necessarily through
death or divorce, but emotional distancing or lack of connection was a more
acceptable way of expressing emotions and unresolved grief.¹

Although neither paper includes stepfathers in their analysis, I believe that
both are helpful in highlighting the complexity attached to cultural notions
of fathering in order to understand better the often more subsidiary role and
position of a stepfather. Omitting stepfathers however, and the voice of men
generally in these papers perhaps in some ways perpetuates the sense of men
being on the very cultural and therapeutic periphery that these studies seek
to combat.

¹ For an insight into masculine identity and the surrounding issues of loss and depression, see Terry
Real’s excellent book I Don’t Want to Talk about It (1997).
Rationale for Study

In bringing the voices of stepfathers to academic literature and making them present within it, I would argue that this may contribute to a move towards their role not being simply conceptualised, theorised or overridden, but known, valued and included in a wider appreciation of what constitutes ‘family’ and ‘fathering’ within culture and society.


**Design**

This research is based on a small qualitative pilot study in which I interview three stepfathers, all of whom reside with their stepchildren.

My research question was consciously broad. Although there is a reasonable amount of literature on the subject of stepfamilies and the impact living within one has on children and their outcomes, there is a paucity of literature on the role of stepfathers in particular. What is written about rarely relies on direct contributions from men being interviewed about their experience of the role. As such, I did not want my research to limit what the men may want to talk about in terms of their experience, nor did I want to superimpose my own positive experience on to theirs with a narrow focus.

The only condition or prerequisite in my selection of interviewees was that each man would be residing with their partner/wife and their stepchild as I wished to glean from the men their experience as stepfathers of forming and sustaining relationships with stepchildren whom they were in daily intimate contact with. I was also curious to know what helped or hindered the success of these relationships and how supported they felt within the role by their partners and the wider family system.

**A qualitative approach / method**

In my interviews with three stepfathers, I am focusing on meaning and sense-making and collecting data in a *naturalistic* manner, which is to say that it should not be summarised, categorised or otherwise reduced (Willig, 2001).
Qualitative research is utilised to explore perhaps a hitherto uncharted experience in detail and as such it often requires a relatively small number of participants. Consequently, this method is well suited to my own task which seeks to hear from stepfathers how they view their role and it is this voice that is largely absent from the academic literature.

I wish to justify the especially small sample used by citing its coherence with a phenomenological epistemology. Each in-depth interview was two hours in length and transcribed verbatim. This produced a considerable amount of data of between 60-80 pages for microanalysis with each interview. I chose then, to focus on depth rather than the generalisations or external validity of numbers as found in quantitative research.

**Data gathering**

I recruited the three men that I interviewed through fellow students and work colleagues. All three men live as I do, in south London, which made arrangements to meet very straightforward.

I used semi structured interviews with which to collect the data and was more concerned to allow the interview to flow than complete my list of chosen questions (see Appendix C for interview protocol).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for this study because its objective is to explore how individuals make sense of their personal world within a given context. This is of particular relevance to the study of a group of stepfathers who have hitherto been underrepresented within the academic literature and whose voiced experience is even less reported. Additionally, given my own close association with the subject
matter, IPA allows for the researcher’s own experience, thoughts and feelings to be a criterion of the interpretative process. To this extent I am engaged in a ‘double hermeneutic’ (Smith et al, 2009) as I attempt to reflect on and make sense of the sense that the participants make of their own experience.

In listening to the stories that the men tell of their own particular experiences and understandings, I am paying attention to and reflecting upon my own perceptions and experiences and how their accounts impact on my interpretation, which I will strive to base on a reading from within the text rather than beyond it.

IPA is a phenomenological inquiry in that from the outset it is an interpretative process and “pursues an idiographic commitment, situating participants in their particular contexts, exploring their personal perspectives, and starting with a detailed examination of each case before moving on to more general claims.” (Smith et al. 2009, p.32).

**Data Analysis**

(See Appendix F for an example of the method described and used in an analysis of a transcript).

Owing to time constraints the interviews were transcribed by an NHS medical secretary. However, I listened to the tapes repeatedly and read the transcripts in tandem which allowed me to immerse myself completely in the data.

In the reading and re-reading of the three transcripts, thoughts and observations following my initial engagement with each text were noted in
the left hand column. I then began to note in the right hand column, possible themes as they occurred to me.

Following this, I began to cluster themes from each transcript but given the volume of them, I had to discard those that appeared to be further observations and summary statements rather than actual themes as well as those themes that would have gone beyond the realms of the research question. An example of this is the account of an event that shook one participant’s first marriage, but this as a theme stood alone in the transcript and would have been difficult to represent as contributing to the text as a whole or the research in particular. Data on relationships with biological children also had to be disregarded unless it was referred to in comparison with their stepchildren.

From the mapping of the themes and observing how they fit together, super-ordinate themes developed as a way of collating a series of emerging themes ‘under one roof’ as it were. One such super-ordinate theme was ‘the role of the mother,’ which I would have assumed, prior to the analysis, to be a constituent theme but which presented as pivotal to an understanding of how stepfathers and perhaps fathers in general, both execute and understand their role.

**Participants**

The men are a fairly homogenous sample; all are white, in their 50’s, reasonably affluent and would probably describe themselves as middle-class, although I feel this to be a ‘catch-all’ term and belies the many cultural differences that may exist.

From my first conversations with the men about the nature of my research, I discovered that none of them felt that their opinions on their role as stepfather had been particularly courted. I felt that this experience was
reflected within the body of literature that I had sourced on stepfamilies, little of which contained quotes or contributions from stepfathers. As much as I think they were pleased to be asked about their experience, I also believe that they were surprised to be asked at all.

One potential participant declined to be interviewed; an African Caribbean stepfather who gave no reason for his decision not to take part. I lament the loss of his contribution and would have liked very much to have discussed his reasons with him.

My hypothesis on this is that he is perhaps wary or hesitant about being interviewed ‘professionally’ as it were. As a black male he may have had cause to distrust professionals and outside agencies. Perhaps, as a marginalised member of the community, he is simply unused to being courted for his opinion generally.

The three participants were:

- Carl*, a 54 year old graduate mental health worker, who lives with his wife Terri, her two children from a previous marriage, Joe (22) and Serena (24) and Carl’s daughter Seraiyah (18) from his first marriage. Carl and Terri have been together since Seraiyah was 2 years old.

- Simon is a 53 year old post graduate education consultant. He has four adult children from his marriage to Una and is very involved in his children’s lives.
  He has lived with his partner Karen and her daughter Fleur for 6 years, since her daughter was 6 years old, but he has been involved with Karen since Fleur was born.

- Dennis, a 59 year old tube driver, has been married to Frances for 6 years and they live with her 18 year old son Liam. It is his first marriage and he has no biological children.
*(All names have been altered).
* For family genograms, please see Appendix B

**Ethical issues**

I received ethical approval from the Tavistock Research Ethics Committee. The main areas of ethical concern for me to attend to are as follows:

- To preserve the anonymity of all those who have participated, being careful not to include any information that may identify the men.

- I was aware that talking about their experiences might raise difficult issues for the participants. I informed each participant that I could arrange for either a consultation to discuss any difficult subject matter and thought and feelings that may arise with them, or refer them to a colleague.

- The subject of stepfathers is one that is particularly close to my heart and made all the more so given the death of my stepfather a few years ago. With this in mind, I arranged to meet with my former systemic psychotherapist and we have subsequently had a number of sessions together to discuss his role in my life and the impact of his death.
In this chapter are the results of the data analysis, which draws on quotes from each interviewee to illustrate each theme (Names have been changed to protect confidentiality). Please see the table below for a summary of my findings.

Table: Master table of super-ordinate and sub-themes

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1. Establishing a role

Each stepfather discusses the important steps of transition as they enter an existing family system and attempt to establish a role within it.

1.1. A process of Integration

Each of the men had been living with their stepchildren for between six and sixteen years so were able to talk about their early experiences with the benefit of time and hindsight.

“...how I explained my relationship to her, um, has evolved in terms of what she feels comfortable with...we’ve had so many issues that we’ve worked through in that first three years of transition...the relationship’s a good one (between him and his partner), you know, but it’s been battered by a lot of extraneous stuff...there was a lot of uncertainty about for three years...a very painful, long drawn out process.” Simon

“she (his stepdaughter) was quite angry...she hung on to that anger...it wasn’t resolved for her until after we got married...four years later”

Carl

Despite being a single man until his fifties, Dennis regarded his new role as a stepfather unequivocally,

“Well, I just thought it as a natural progression in our relationship...if I wanted to be with Frances then obviously Liam came as part of the package.”

There is an idea of entering uncharted territory for the men. For Carl, he and his wife,
“Just kind of bumbled into it really…I don’t think that we thought very carefully about how to introduce the idea of the relationship to the children…we just didn’t know how to have those conversations at that stage.”

Simon describes the process of leaving his first family,

“I couldn’t cope with um, losing that family unit that I think was my big subconscious ambition because I didn’t have a solid upbringing”

He explains the relationship he had with his wife in the parenting of their children, and sees it in different terms to what he has now,

“…it’s like this fluent kind of process…you’re kind of two people in a team…whereas I, I think in my relationship with Karen (the mother of his stepchild), it’s just two adults really who, um are quite separate…very good friends and lovers…but it’s not done in that same kind of symbiotic way”

1.2. Indeterminate role: how to fit in

Each of the men reflected on the vagueness of the role and the difficulty of finding a place within an existing family structure.

“Looking back…I mistakenly attempted to play a parental role…I thought it would be useful” “I tried to play more of a prominent role, it wasn’t um, appreciated”

Carl goes on to lament the consequences of stepping back from this more active role that led to him feeling that he was not as emotionally connected to his stepchild, as he would have liked. By stepping back, he abandons his desire to be more fully involved.

“I would have withdrawn and got ratty about it… it’s also taken out the possibility of some kind of intimacy…now I let Terri get on with it”
Carl believes that Terri lacked confidence in her ability as a parent to define and clarify to her children Carl’s new role in their lives.

“There wasn’t a parental confidence…to say this person has the same parental authority as me, wants the same for you…therefore you have to listen to him. It was vexing…still is”

Defining the indeterminate, amorphous stepfather role is also difficult for the biological parent and has implications on how the stepfather views his contribution. This is something the couple has to negotiate.

Simon says,

“Karen had very low expectations of my role…very low, she didn’t want me to feel obliged…she certainly didn’t expect me to pay for her daughter’s um, maintenance…she found it not that easy to ask me if I could be in when she was out…things are very different now”

Unlike Carl, who continues to feel distant from his stepson, Simon has negotiated a more involved role,

“Karen’s been quite a good model for me…she’s allowed her expectations of my responsibilities to evolve in a way that I negotiate both individually and collectively with her”

The word ‘evolve’ also suggests indeterminacy in that the parameters of what a stepfather does is nebulous and shifts; here in a positive way.
Dennis has an idea of what the expectations would be of a biological father, but this does not necessarily translate to being a stepfather. Dennis seemed to see the limits of his role, deeming his involvements in Liam’s disciplining to be beyond his remit although, confusingly, he is expected to play some part, but one that has less authority and is ill defined.

“Because he’s not my biological son…it means I have to leave things, discipline and other things, up to Frances…I can tell him off…but when it comes down to it, Frances has more sway over him than I do”

1.2. Family systems and scripts

The influence of the participants’ family systems seemed to impact on both their understanding of the role and possibly their beliefs about family relationships and involvement.

For example, Dennis is keen to distance himself from his own parental example suggesting an attempt at a corrective script. (Byng-Hall, 1995)

“Um, I don’t think it’s got anything to do with it, I mean I’m not my father, I’m not my mother…I have my own ideas on parenting” Dennis

Conversely Carl who had a close relationship with his own father has wanted to have a more prominent role in his stepchildren’s life.

“I was much more close to my dad than my mum……after the age of kind of 18, 19, 20 my dad and I had a very close relationship for the rest of his life” Carl

Only Simon spoke at length about his family of origin and was perhaps more able to connect it to his understanding of his own agency in his
stepfather role. The fact that Simon has been looked after by people other than his parents means that stepping into a parental role does not feel as alien to him.

“...as um, a little boy, I remember being influenced by a range of adults...my extended family...I remember having lots of relationships with people, so I became outgoing and confident”

“I suppose I’ve had this kind of caring role that you get landed with...[and] do a bit of a rescuing act in your own relationships, so you want to care for others and help them as a way of validating your own worth I suppose”

Perhaps Simon’s greater ease in the role stems from having had a stepfather himself. He has some kind of model of what a stepfather might be.

“I feel quite emotional talking about it actually, er, a kind of love that’s unspoken, he’s been around my whole life...he stands in for my real father ‘I’ve never spelt it out but as I say I think there’s a sort of unspoken respect and love between us”

1.4. Society, culture and biology

Alongside the influence of their family systems, the participants understanding of their role was informed by wider social and cultural ideas, particularly those that privilege biological ties. Carl says of his stepson:

“I think what he really wanted was approval from his mum and dad...that was much more the issue”

“I...wasn’t what he wanted, the proximity, the closeness to me”

Carl also speaks similarly about his stepchildren’s relationship with their mother. Carl believes that the relationship between a mother and her children is ring fenced and this excludes him:
“I...stick to the idea that this was their relationship...and I shouldn’t get too closely involved”

He continues with thoughts of his biological daughter Seraiyah, who he has raised since the age of 3. Here again is the idea that biology determines the nature of the relationship one has with a child.

“I think it would be remarkable if not impossible to love them in the same way that I would love Seraiyah”

Simon contemplates a recent experience with a married friend of his who has biological children of his own. His partner observes closeness between the father and his children, perhaps implying that the bond that he has with his stepdaughter is qualitatively different.

“he’s got a wife and two children...we went and had lunch and Karen’s reaction was...they seem really close...really kind of tuned in to each other...I guess that’s what it’s like when you’re married and you have kids together”

Dennis makes this difference explicit.

“I think it’s different to biological, well I mean I’ve not experienced er, kids er myself...but you do hear people... say that once someone’s had a child, they would do anything for that child...the bond is different.” Dennis

Simon confides that societal opinion can ordain levels of intimacy,

“It’s a safeguarding issue for me, I might be thinking like a professional...I mean she can sit on my lap...we can be cuddling...but...she’s like 12, possibly makes me feel a little uncomfortable for the whole thing to be too close, not because
I’m worried about what’s inside me but about how it might be perceived...somebody outside the family.”

Regarding the stepfather role, Simon acknowledges,

“There’s so many... factors that impinge upon the way families behave: cultural, economic, political, social.”

1.5. Influence of gender

Listening to the participants, differing reports emerged regarding their relationships with their stepsons and stepdaughters.

“He’s a teenager, and er, they’re not the most communicative people at the best of times, especially boys, so we rub along” “he won’t come and talk to me er, about anything”

“I never resorted to smacking him...I would try and tell him things...make him better, that’s the wrong word...point out the error of his ways”

Dennis

Carl refers to closeness with his stepdaughter that eludes him and his stepson Joe,

“It doesn’t feel like in adult life there will be the kind of relationship with Joe there is with Serena”

Gender plays a role in Carl’s relationship with his stepchildren. He identifies differences in the way he relates to his stepson and stepdaughter. He contemplates the role that his wife would have wanted him to have with her son: one that is less parental and more of a friend.

“My wife noticed that I had a different relationship with my stepson than my stepdaughter... it seemed more complex with my stepson... and she
wanted someone who was friendly and sympathetic to them but who would not challenge them, less parental”

Simon also touches on gender differentials in his thinking about his biological children and this is replicated with his stepdaughter.

“I’ve spent so much time talking to my kids, especially the girls”

2. Role of Mother
2.1. The gatekeeper

The participants’ partners were cited frequently as the arbiters of family life and were pivotal for two of the men in their understanding of how much of a role to have in their stepchild’s life. The following quotes from Carl make explicit how excluded he feels from the parental dyad and how difficult it felt for him to feel part of the parenting process.

“It was very difficult to have a relationship with Serena cos there was something all encompassing about Terri’s relationship with her that couldn’t be interfered with”

“…there is something very particular about the three of them being together…there’s something very important on an emotional level for them …it’s quite exclusive

“I’ve often wondered…how easy it is …for mothers and fathers to entertain the idea of an outsider playing a parental role and I think it was very difficult for Terri”

Carl
Simon echoes this sentiment; despite his more active role in co-parenting he maintains that

“I haven’t got the same status...as her mother does”

Dennis is careful not to challenge or intrude on the maternal gatekeeper role,

“Frances has more sway over him than I do so I’d rather Frances tell him something that’s important than for me to...and for him to get narked about it”

2.2. Finding ways in

The men spoke of their particular routes of entry into their stepchildren’s lives, whilst remaining respectful of the maternal terrain.

For Simon his route seems to be bolstered by both a personal and professional expertise,

“...it depends on what it’s about, but when it comes to managing Fleur, I think that she [Karen] knows that I know a lot about this sort of thing so she’s not too defensive”

For Dennis, the route toward his stepson is by way of his wife,

“Well, I glean information from him via Frances who manages to pin him down now and again to talk”

Dennis
Carl feels that he has had to wait for his stepdaughter to become an adult to have the kind of relationship with her that he desired, albeit one that was independent from his wife,

“...as soon as she moved out we got closer, kind of overnight really and Serena, Seraiyah and I became a kind of identifiable sub-unit...I don’t think Terri liked it very much”

“I would have wished it had been easier for Terri to let me in...I have a relationship with Serena now that isn’t dependant on Terri...hopefully that might happen with Joe in years to come”

3. Biological fathers

3.1. Honour and respect

The participants were mindful to be respectful of their stepchildren’s biological father and appeared to honour both the role and the relationship that they had with their children, for the sake of the children. Perhaps stepfathers facilitate a good relationship with the biological father to secure another route towards intimacy with their stepchildren.

Carl reflects,

“I think kids are in a better position if they’ve got a relationship with biological parents... I have never said a bad word about their dad...I’m kind of encouraging them to persist with having a relationship with him”

“I think badmouthing the other adults in the matrix of relationships is...something that sticks with kids for a long time”
He goes on to add,

“…if they’d had a better relationship with their dad I think they might have had a better relationship with me”

Simon’s stance is unequivocal,

“I knew…before I was a stepfather…I’d never say I’m your dad…one of the first principles is respect for Fleur’s parentage and her father and…encourage her to see her father in the most positive light as possible and to encourage the attachment”

He also attempts to understand the biological tie and the difference in relationship that this might create,

“I would like it understood …what the importance of genetics are in a relationship between an adult and a child…if a child knows that you’re not their father, say you’ve taken them on post-infancy, I think the fact that you are a biological or non-biological father, there’s got to be some significance in that in the mind of the child and the mind of the father…I would like to be able to understand that more…the rest of it is all about parenting, so as long as the stepfather understands good parenting …you’ve got the recipe for a decent job”

3.2. Distant dads

Participants lamented the absence of their stepchildren’s father or fathers generally and cite unmet financial obligations as a source of disappointment.

“…he doesn’t really keep in touch with his dad… he knows his dad isn’t bothered about him” “It irked me for a while because his dad never did anything for him, hardly paid a pittance…but Liam realised his dad isn’t…the greatest dad in the world” Dennis
“I mean, they were estranged from their dad for a number of years…they saw virtually nothing of him…I think she [Serena] would like to see more of him”

Carl

Simon encapsulates the thinking of all the men when he talks about the importance of fathers to children, here in particular to boys:

“I’ve managed the boys to men team…so…dealing with an absent father is a big challenge for a lot of young men…they want to see benevolence”

Simon

4. Seeking intimacy

4.1. Being there

Participants spoke at length about their desire for close relationships with their stepchildren. However, what the participants and their families seemed to value unequivocally about their role was the extent to which it brought to all family members a reassuring, stable and constant presence.

As Carl observes,

“I kind of stuck around, and that I was still there in, you know, what may well have been difficult …I refuse to be kind of beaten or ground down…there was some kind of value in sticking with…what was at times, a pretty thankless task”
“I’ve got through some rocky years and still managed to have a relationship of some intimacy…there were times when I was there when neither his [Joe’s] mum or dad were and I think that some day he will remember that”

“Someone said…you need to leave work very quickly which I did to go pick Joe up…I feel quite proud of the…capacity against quite difficult odds…of being available”

Dennis also sees the value of being present, describing his mission as,

“to be there…to help him when I could, even if he didn’t want me to”

When I asked him what his wife valued most about his role his answer was concise,

“Probably just being there”

Simon identifies his desire to be there for his stepdaughter as synonymous with that of any father,

“she…whether she’s my child, natural child…or stepchild, has the same kinds of needs from me as one of her main carers, as if I was her father”

4.2. Greater involvement in stepchild’s life

Each of the men spoke of the process of becoming closer to, and having a greater role in their stepchildren’s lives.

Carl believes that his stepdaughter wanted him to have a more amplified role, despite his wife’s hesitance in allowing this,

“Serena would mainly have wanted me to be a bit more prominent, more prominent” “I would have wished that it had been easier for Terri to let me in.”
However, a trip with Serena appears to have cemented their closeness,

“She does look to me in some kind of important adult way now...two days we went to the Middle East together...and I think that was quite a big thing for her in terms of her relationship with me”

Simon has negotiated an involvement with Fleur that seems to have parity with that of her mother,

“...there’s been about four or five occasions in six years where in our conversation...she’s left feeling unsatisfied and had to go to her mum, but I couldn’t give you an example” “I was doing this [placating her] but it wasn’t working...and she started calling out for her mum...now that felt weird...that doesn’t happen very often”

Dennis seeks a more familiar relational terrain as he looks to an involvement that sees him being less of a parent and more of a friend,

“I mean he’s 19 now, I want to start being more mates with him than anything else, I don’t want to be the stepparent stepson...now he’s becoming an adult, we should look upon each other as sort of equal”

4.3. Language and closeness

Participants appear to struggle to articulate the depth of feeling and the meaning of their relationship with their stepchild.

“...if I’m honest, the difference is the intensity of love...but I have noticed...how deeply emotionally I feel in my bond towards Fleur...I think the respect I have for her in terms of how she is developing as a person, you know, I, I think it’s er, you can see me getting kind of emotional”
“they [his children] spread goodwill…and that’s what Fleur does really well…I feel a small part of that, so more recently…I feel the differences becoming a bit of a blur really”

“I’ve been out with her today…er, very fond of her, very fond of her, she’s lovely”

“I feel as proud of her as I do my own kids…she really is an exceptional little girl…cos she’s my stepdaughter…I’ve made some contribution to that”

Simon

When I asked Dennis what he thinks Liam feels about him, he looked taken aback,

“Er, I think deep down he respects me”

Dennis, a little later on, identifies an episode where he felt his stepson’s actions, rather than words demonstrated the closeness between them,

“Frances was away…and I was looking after Liam for the weekend, um, I got a call…saying my dad had died overnight and I had to tell Liam…he just instinctively came over and gave me a hug, which was er, quite nice…he was just 13 at the time…it was good…he was as good as gold”

Carl tends to express his closeness for his stepdaughter in terms of his contribution to her life,

“I’ve…quite an important role in Serena’s life”, “I’ve introduced Serena to ways of thinking of doing things that she wouldn’t maybe have come across…she’s found that quite valuable.”
4.4. Claiming, responsibility and identity

This section outlines a stepfather’s desire to claim and be responsible for his stepchild which can be affected by legal ambiguity, racial difference and biology.

Dennis outlines his confusion,

“I don’t know legally if I’d be next of kin…probably not, probably be his grandparents or aunts…but I would feel obliged to say, look after him…still be involved with him very much, cos I think he would need someone if that should happen”

“Well it’s something I’d willingly do, I mean I’ve known him 11 years now, he’s been part of my life for 11 years so, I mean Frances and I specifically made wills that stipulate… he’s looked after”

Simon then shares his thoughts about claiming his stepchild,

“I’ve got one child who I am not legal stepfather to, but I’ve been living, bringing her up with my partner for six years”

“…so I’ve started a couple of times saying she was my daughter”

4.5. He then goes on to speak specifically about issues surrounding identity.

“We’ve had some fascinating conversations about how I refer to Fleur in relation to me…feeling very acutely conscious of her racial identity…she used to get a bit anxious cos she didn’t want people to think she was adopted because there were two white parents” “She prefers me to say stepdaughter because then her sense of self is intact in terms of how she wants to see herself in this family”

This process of a struggle for identity within a family is as much a process for the stepfather as it is for the child and in this sense they are
perhaps isomorphic and it may speak to the closeness and identification that exists between Simon and his stepdaughter.
I shall summarise the main points of my findings from the analysis in conjunction with the literature cited, suggesting where there may be omissions and how my research may have attempted to address these. I shall then consider how clinicians might utilise the findings. I will conclude with what I believe may be the implications for future research as well as a reflection on how this body of work has impacted on my own thinking.

**Linking the existing literature with the findings**

**The process of establishing a role**

The participants spoke passionately about their efforts to establish their stepfather role whilst sanguinely accepting that it could not be instantly defined or immediately successful; it had to evolve within a process of family adjustment. The theme of developing and establishing a role and a place within an existing family system, echoed throughout the study and it has determined the prominence that it is accorded here. Other themes which have emerged as prominent within this study concern the role of mother, biological fathers and biological ties and the search for intimacy and closeness.

The research is positive about the contributions that stepfathers make to their stepchildren’s lives, indicating that children fare well and report good relationships (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001 et al). This positive appraisal of the role accords with the participants’ experience, as each describes closeness, affection and a commitment to their stepchildren. However, the research can
also sound a cautious note when it considers how a stepfather might play the
‘amorphous’ role itself, suggesting that stepfathers consider the question of
‘how much to be a parent,’ and asks if they can ever assume the parent role
(Visher and Visher, 1979). Other research refers to the complicated family
dance that stepfathers must do to avoid becoming substitute fathers, with the
implication that he must not step on the biological father’s toes (Smart &

Perhaps what is striking here is the extent to which the participants’
experience of the indeterminacy of the role itself is echoed in the research
literature, which hints at what stepfathers should avoid being whilst not
indicating what his role may be, beyond that of a ‘friend.’ The participants’
experience appears to cohere most with the research that suggests that there
is no mould for stepfamilies to fit in to, nor a universal prescriptive
regarding how best to execute the roles within them (Skogrand, Davis &
Higginbotham, 2011, Bernstein, 1999). Creating a narrative for the
stepfather role may depend on the development of a new appreciation for
families in transition and the indeterminacy, ambiguity and ambivalence that
accompanies this; which may be a feature of post-modern family life
generally (Bernstein, 1999). An understanding of the unique quality of each
stepfamily, with its ability to self-define family life and the roles within it,
may also be helpful.

Given the indeterminacy of the role, participants move towards the idea of a
parental role but then retreat from it as the spectre of their lack of biological
status and tie appears to hover over them. Indeed, each man’s reflections
were liberally littered with references to biology, biological parents and their
diminished status in the face of both. Perhaps the literature, which I saw as
stepping too cautiously around the role of the biological parent in general
and the father in particular (Smart & Neale, 1999), had picked up on
something that I had chosen to overlook and which the men had brought me
back to: its importance to them in their considerations of their role. My response was to cite the literature that focused on positive stepfather contributions (White and Gilbreth, 2001, Gorell Barnes, Thompson et al, 1997) and in so doing, I perhaps narrowed my own understanding of their experience.

According to the research, the role that stepfathers play in their stepchild’s life and their quality of relationship can be impacted upon by the gender of the child. Some of the literature suggests that the relationship between stepfathers and stepdaughters was more problematic than that between stepfathers and their stepsons (Clingempeel, Ievoli and Brand, 1984), but most of the literature makes little or no distinction between the two. Bernstein (1999) suggests that female stepchildren, who report negatively about a stepfather or stepmother, may have a gendered propensity to focus more on the quality of relationships within each family dyad and to consider more intently whether relational needs are being met.

My findings indicate that stepfathers who had stepdaughters were engaging in frequent conversations with them and seeking them out to spend time together, which appeared to pay dividends in their relationship. Stepsons were experienced as distant and taciturn by their stepfathers but each stepfather desired an improved future relationship with him. Perhaps the slow and easy pace of befriending that Visher and Visher (1979) believe is crucial, requires even more tentativeness when stepfathers are relating to stepsons, as men of all ages may be bound to some extent, by a social discourse which distrusts the male desire for relational intimacy. Perhaps also, the relationship between stepfather and child may be affected by the son’s or daughter’s relationship with their mother.

In interpreting the data, I have a sense that perhaps ideas of gender are at their most active when informing the participants that family life is
essentially organised and scripted by the female. Where there is less of a sense of this idea; it is perhaps due to the absence or exclusion of the participants’ own mothers which may have permitted them a more fluid idea of parental roles.

**The role and influence of the mother**

Within the literature, there are only two references to the important ‘gate-keeping’ role that mothers can play in determining levels of closeness between stepfathers and stepchildren (King, 2006, Smart and Neale, 1999). As mothers encourage or restrict relationships, the research suggests that for both stepfamilies and ‘intact’ families, the father’s relationship is not independent from the mother’s, rendering his role secondary or supportive. This appears to be the case for the stepfathers interviewed, as they make reference to their lesser status either in theory or in actuality. However, Simon’s confidence and relational prowess that came from securing nurture from a variety of adults during his own childhood rendered him able to negotiate his way in to a co-parenting role. Where participants have felt excluded from collaborative parenting, they imagine either an improved relationship beyond the child-rearing years or the actualising of a relationship, independent of the mother, when the adult stepchild has left home.

That the mother role is seen as pivotal within many families may be elementary, but what none of the literature seeks to uncover, or even allude to, is how she may be positioned as such, by a powerful, almost binding wider discourse that can define and even restrict the relational possibilities within a family dynamic generally and perhaps within the dynamic of a stepfamily in particular. The participants’ privileging of the maternal role or the caution that they feel regarding the possible encroachment onto her territory, may be understood within the context of this discourse and the
expectation that parenting and nurturing is done primarily by women. However, with power and expertise located within this ‘mother-type’ monolith, both men and women perform their lesser or greater roles in isolation, as the participants at times testify. Perhaps the loneliness that can come with the exclusiveness of the mothering role produces a desire for even greater closeness with her children which may of course further exclude her partner.

Running alongside this idea are again, issues of biology, with the maternal role being privileged in part because she is the sole biological parent of the child within the family. The participants at times appeared to understand their role as limited if not by the ‘gatekeeper’ mother, then by their lack of biological connection to the child. Each expressed the view that feelings for a biological child compared to those for a stepchild are inevitably different, but when they explored this view within the context of their actual relationship with their stepchild, the idea and experience of the difference seemed to dissipate. The research does not fully elaborate on this concern or the relational differences that are perceived by the men.

Perhaps the privileging of biological ties emerges within a social and cultural context that holds that men who seek relational closeness and intimacy with a child do so only when it is by virtue of biology. Only then can their desire be unambiguous and trusted and permitted by the mother. Perhaps the loneliness that can come with the exclusiveness of the mothering role produces a desire for even greater closeness with her children which may of course further exclude partners.

**The relationship with biological fathers**

The research suggests that a good relationship with a stepfather produces greater positive effects than that with a non-custodial father. It also indicates
that stepfamilies can promote more positive relationships with a non-resident father and that the relationship between a biological father and a stepfather is not as competitive as one may think (White and Gilbreth, 2001 and King, 2006)

Perhaps I had assumed that the relationship between the two would inevitably be more fraught and competitive, but this was not the case and this was borne out by insightful research which describes this relationship as collaborative. (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004, Visher & Visher, 1979). The honour and respect that participants show towards their stepchild’s biological father and their desire that his involvement in his child’s life be encouraged, reveals perhaps that the interests of their stepchildren are uppermost in their minds. It may also reveal that they want less to be substitute or ‘proper’ fathers, but more engaged in something of a joint parenting endeavour with the mother, who may be mediating levels of closeness between the stepfather and child.

The research goes on to suggest that the positive effects that are generated by a good quality relationship with a stepfather, does not depend on the quality of relationship a child has with their biological father (White and Gilbreth, 2001, Bernstein, 1999). However, Carl believed strongly that this was not the case and that his stepchildren’s negative relationship with their father had had a direct impact on his relationship with them. He contends that the distance between them, may have led the children to regard their stepfather as having ‘usurped’ their father, despite his attempts to be loyal to him and supportive of his role.

For Dennis, his disappointment that his stepson’s father was less involved was palpable. I wondered if his disappointment with his stepson’s biological father might be isomorphic with his own disappointment and sadness that he doesn’t occupy a more pivotal role at this point in his adolescent’s stepson’s
life, (which may be connected to the relationship Liam has with his father), or that it might suggest something of his own relationship with his father; a point that a clinician would do well to explore with a presenting family. As the research suggests, perhaps collaboration and negotiation with a child’s father can in some way help a stepfather develop a sense of ‘how much of a parent’ he can be (Visher and Visher, 1979) and how each can support the other in defining a role that proves most helpful to the child. Perhaps the research could have attended more to the repercussions that a more difficult relationship between these men can bring and how it may impact on the levels of closeness between stepfather and child.

Seeking intimacy and being there

The most predominant themes to emerge from the transcribed interviews were those that spoke of the participants’ desire for closeness and intimacy with their stepchildren. In particular, the act of ‘being there’ and providing a stable and constant presence to the family was what seemed to be valued unequivocally by all family members and the participants themselves. The value of ‘being there’ is confirmed by the research which highlights frequently the positive impact of the stepfather’s presence on child outcomes and family relations (Gorell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, and Burchardt, 1997, White & Gilbreth, 2001, King, 2006). It appears that in this area the participants perhaps felt on more solid ground in both their understanding of their role and the contribution that they make to family life.

Each participant felt that residing with a stepchild and being a daily presence to him or her, brought significant benefits to the relationship and that this was the case even where they had biological children of their own. The research is in accord with this finding, suggesting that there is little effect on the quality of the stepfather-child relationship and conflicts of
loyalty were perceived to be minimal (Clingempeel, Ievoli & Brand, 1984, Sweeney, 2010, King, 2006).

The participants would however, speak of the perceived differences that they felt in their feelings toward their biological children and stepchildren. Perhaps the literature could have highlighted what appeared to be the discrepancy between the ideas of difference between biological children and stepchildren and the actuality of the relationships with both which suggests that there are few.

The participants’ beliefs and ideas about their relationships with their stepchildren seem to be located in and limited by, an impoverished social discourse which fails to convey the most resonant aspects of this unexplored relationship, including the closeness, emotion and feeling that can exist between them. The research appears to be isomorphic with this discourse as both appear to find it hard to language the experience of the ‘step’ relationship and in particular, to put into words the love and affection that can exist between them. Perhaps to use the language so associated with the biological bond may feel a little taboo. It may also suggest a discourse that forces a choice between two paradigms, which can be totalising (Larner, 2008); both for society generally and for stepfathers particularly.

Despite the difficulty of language, the participants provide a moving insight into their depth of feeling for, and commitment to their stepchildren. They appear to execute the formula for stepfamily success which the research highlights; namely that they form relationships slowly and respectfully and with flexibility and spousal agreement (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). As they do so, the participants seek ever greater levels of intimacy with their stepchildren, especially through acts that demonstrate commitment, responsibility and fidelity, rather than through expressed feeling.
To widen the lens on this, if the participants appear to down play their expressions of affection and relational need, this may be indicative of a particular social mandate that instructs men in general to turn away from intimacy itself (Real, 1997). If this is so, then perhaps closeness is at times more comfortably expressed practically and physically rather than emotionally. Indeed, when asked, adult stepchildren suggest that in hindsight, what has meant the most to them is their stepfather’s presence: (Gorell- Barnes et al, 1997). This appreciation of dependability is often unacknowledged at the time and only spoken about much later by the stepchild in their adult life.

Given the participants’ repeated desire for greater involvement with their stepchildren, it is an area of omission within the existing research which has failed to explore this. Perhaps the idea of a stepfather’s closeness and intimacy with a stepchild raises another taboo and with it a wariness regarding physical closeness between a man and a child not biologically connected. Indeed, the research makes one mention of closeness between stepfather and child, but only in the context of sexual relations between the two (Visher and Visher, 1979). The desire of a stepfather to be close to his stepchild and his concern about how this closeness might be perceived is nowhere to be found in the literature. It is left to one participant to raise this taboo, during an honest and frank two hour interview. Perhaps the difficulty that each stepfather has in describing his feelings for his stepchild reflects the caution that society attaches to men who have no biological ties to a child, but who seek closeness nevertheless. I salute them.
Clinical considerations

In discussing how this research may aid a clinical understanding of the stepfather role, I am aware that a number of the issues that emerge may filter into a wider understanding of family life generally.

It may be helpful for a clinician to deconstruct with a stepfather and mother their understanding of their own roles and how they, as individuals, wish to play theirs in the face of the definitions and ideas of responsibility and status that society attaches to each. A therapist may choose to explore how possible it might be for mothers and stepfathers to unite around the common purpose of raising children given that one of them is not the biological parent and how this might be negotiated with a non-resident father.

I concur with the research that it is important to validate and normalise the diverse experiences of stepfamilies and to appreciate the complexity regarding the rights and responsibilities of the stepfather role. Here, the therapist may try to elicit realistic expectations regarding the time it takes to establish this new role and for the turbulence of a new family formation to settle. They may point out that instant love and success is unusual but that their efforts to be a family indicate strength and resilience rather than deficits. It might also be helpful to draw a family’s attention to the life cycle change of adolescence, where the process of pulling away and becoming distant and taciturn could be understood less as a rejection of the stepfather or a statement on his status, but more as a natural process common to many families, however they are constructed.

A key task for a therapist may be to liberate clients from the disabling, unrealistic and impoverished stories (Bernstein, 1999) that are associated with stepfamily life in general and with stepfathers in particular, who can experience their role as marginalised and peripheral. In doing so, a clinician
may help the family to uncover new and multiple understandings of how family life can be which pertains to systemic practice. Furthermore, a systemic therapist will attempt to help the family by being transparent and showing gender, race and cultural awareness.

In researching this area, I believe that as clinicians who wish to encourage the participation of those family members who view their role as peripheral and who may find it difficult to speak about the emotional aspects of their relationships, we need to be aware of the impact of male socialisation. Here, the research by Terry Real (1997) and Walters, Tasker and Bichard (2001) have been invaluable and I would recommend clinicians access this work. Both suggest that men are often raised to cut off from their emotions and feelings, suffering relational impoverishment and insecurity as they do so. Clinically, these researchers suggest inviting a man to talk about loss, such as that which he has experienced with his own parents, either through death, divorce or emotional distance, rather than his emotions and feelings, as this may prove more fruitful in accessing discussions about male identity and the stepfather role.

Only one of the interviewees spoke at length about his family background and the relational losses that he had endured. Perhaps he was able to do so because the absence of both parents may have allowed for a less reified idea of gender roles and identity. Whatever the case, for a therapist who seeks to help widen and enrich the understanding that an individual stepfather has of his role, a sensitive and patient exploration of his family of origin issues, which can play a leading, if silent role in the stepfamily drama (Bernstein, 1999) may reap dividends.

Ultimately, the idea of the uniqueness of each stepfather role and of him and other family members as individuals located in wider systems of interaction (Larner, 2008) perhaps needs to be heavily signposted for clinicians as they
utilise multiple lenses with which to understand and work with presenting families.

**Limitations of research**

This study has inevitably been limited by its small scale and the homogeneity of the sample. I recognise the limitations of the study as a result of this and can make no generalised claims regarding my findings beyond the participants who were interviewed.

My focus was deliberately broad as the study was intended to be exploratory in tone and purpose. Despite this, the contribution of this study is, I believe, to give voice to the lived experience of stepfathers not widely represented in the stepfamily literature. Although there are some overlaps between my findings and that of the literature, the extent to which either can illuminate the other is again, perhaps somewhat limited.

**Further research**

One stepfather who was interviewed wanted a better understanding of the importance of genetics in the relationship between a stepfather and child. He wanted to understand the confusion that he and others feel about the perceived differences in feeling for a child that is biologically one's own and one that is not; differences that when explored, appear to diminish or disappear. This may potentially be a rich area for research, involving the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of stepfathers and fathers together against the backdrop of the wider societal and cultural discourse that may inform their ideas.

Perhaps further research might explore society’s view of the closeness that can exist between stepfather and child and how this might be understood as
occurring within a relationship like any other, which is constructed out of affection and a sense of responsibility. As such, perhaps this research might contribute to a more ‘de-naturalised’ concept of family which focuses on how well each role is played rather than the fact of biology.

A wider research study might focus on the perceived peripheral role of the stepfather and how parenting, when performed by males generally can be viewed as a secondary activity. The existing research makes mention of the pivotal mother role but a further study might explore the social discourse that ring fences the maternal terrain and thus imposes limits on the contribution of both fathers and stepfathers.

Perhaps the most interesting research of all might be that which seeks to explore the many and varied efforts that stepfathers make to expand the narrow confines of their role in their search for greater closeness and intimacy with their stepchildren. Only then can the meagre stepfather discourse that currently exists, be expanded upon and enriched.

**Self reflexivity**

(See Appendix E for extracts of my self reflexive diary)

As I consider this area of research, the interview process and the subsequent analysis and interpretation, I am aware that it has helped to change aspects of me and my thinking. I have, I think, broadened and deepened my understanding of the stepfather role specifically, but also of men generally and have more appreciation of their overt and covert struggles to be ‘in relation’ with others.

Taciturn men may have irked me and provided good reason to move away from them, as I regarded their lack of words as proof of a desire for distance
and a lack of intimacy. Now I am curious about my privileging of words over other communications such as action, ‘being,’ commitment and responsibility.

I have moved beyond a ‘mother-blaming’ position which sought to locate within her, the responsibility for keeping a stepfather at bay. I see this idea as part of a wider discourse that makes mothers pivotal within and responsible for, family relationships, whilst overlooking the reality that she too is subject to and governed by its limiting and isolating dictates.

I used to believe that the reason that my stepfather and I did not discuss how we felt about each other was because the relationship obviously lacked the emotional connections that can exist between ‘true’ fathers and daughters, despite the fact that this was not my experience. I now believe, as with other ‘step’ relationships, that the stepfather-stepdaughter relationship lacks what other relationships may take for granted: namely the multiple conversations, words and shared stories that help define it.

**Conclusion**

What began as personal thoughts and reflections following the death of my stepfather, evolved into the following research question: What are stepfathers’ experiences of their position/role within the family? It is difficult to know to what extent this question has been fully answered or addressed, particularly given the small scale of the research and the relative homogeneity of the group. Furthermore, it was not my aim to ‘discover truth’ but rather to situate my findings within the context of the language and methodology that both confer meaning and constrain it (Bernstein, 1999). What I hope that I have achieved in this study is an honourable interpretation of both the subjective experience of these men and the
influences that have shaped this experience as they give voice to a story rarely told or heard.

I have been moved beyond words (like the men themselves at times), by the affection and care that these stepfathers provide for their stepchildren and the quality of relationships that emerges between them as a result. Their tenacity to keep going and to continue ‘being there’ despite the difficulties that can occur within family life and beyond it has been inspiring and thought-provoking; I have learnt a great deal from these men.

My stepfather would tell me often that it wasn’t what you said but what you did that counted and with hindsight perhaps this wisdom (influenced as it may be by culture, gender and his own family system!) has permeated this work and the reflections and experience of the men within it. Like my stepfather, their feelings seem to be communicated in other ways; not least by their active commitment and responsibility towards their stepchildren and by simply being there, perhaps as in my stepfather’s case, until the very end.
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**APPENDIX A**

**Initial themes**

The initial themes for the three interviews are coded here. The interviews are presented in chronological order and anonymised using the names Carl, Simon and Dennis. The first number of the coding refers to the order of interviews eg.

1- Carl,
2- Simon
3- Dennis

The second number refers to the number of the theme for that interview. The third number refers to the section of the interview in the transcript.

E.g: 1:1.1.36 signifies 1: the first interview, 1: the first theme, Role; to be found in segment 1.36 in the transcript
Interview 1: Carl

Understanding Role

Establishing role: A process
1:1:1.06
1:1:2.41
1:1:14.11
1:1:46.27

Indeterminate role/fitting in
1:1:6.36
1:1:14.32
1:1:22.36
1:1:33.46
1:1:34.35
1:1:47.53

Family system
1:1:1.02.06
1:1:1.03.46

Society, culture and biology
1:1:10.16
1:1:11.43
1:1:25.59
1:1:26.56
Influence of gender
1:1:15.10
1:1:30.29
1:1:34.35

Role of mother
1:2:10.16
1:2:17.33
1:2:18.36
1:2:20.14
1:2:38.30
1:2:48.42

Finding ways in
1:2:15.48
1:2:20.14
1:2:35.28
1:2:1.11.55

Biological father
1:3:1.16
1:3:56.18
1:3:59.22

Distant dads
1:3:54.57
Seeking intimacy

Being there
1:4:39.27
1:4:1.05.58
1:4:1.05.59

Greater involvement
1:4:20.14
1:4:30.29
1:4:1.09.01

Language and closeness
1:4:27.37
1:4:39.27
1:4:1.00.16
Interview 2: Simon

Understanding Role

Establishing role: A process
2:1:7.39
2:1:15.17
2:1:30.28
2:1:30.29

Indeterminate role/fitting in
2:1:17.01
2:1:18.01
2:1:1.07.50

Family system
2:1:5.17
2:1:7.01
2:1:7.57
2:1:17.02
2:1:19.50
2:1:55.10
2:1:1.11.37

Society, culture and biology
2:1:14.14
2:1:15.17
2:1:25.51
Influence of gender
2:1:20.34
2:1:23.10
2:1:36.54.
2:1:45.38.
2:1:46.03

Role of mother
2:2:11.42
Finding ways in
2:2:19.48
2:2:44.34
2:2:45.21
2:2:53.17

Biological father
2:3:31.30
Distant dads
2:3:32.05

Seeking intimacy
Being there
2:4:17.02
2:4:32.59
Greater involvement
2:4:46.53
2:4:50.04
Language and closeness
Claiming and responsibility
2:4:10.50
2:4:23.38
2:4:1.05.07

Identity
2:4:7.39
Interview 3: Dennis

Understanding Role

Establishing role: A process
3:1:6.48
3:1:44.13
3:1:49.55

Indeterminate role/fitting in
3:1:7.40
3:1:30.50

Family system
3:1:35.36

Society, culture and biology
3:1:22.01
3:1:45.17
3:1:50.40

Influence of gender
3:1:7.54
3:1:9.21
3:1:13.11
3:1:13.37
3:1:29.19
Role of mother
3:2:30.50
Finding ways in
3:2:5.31
3:2:13.37
3:2:34.44

Biological father
Distant dads
3:3:51.57
3:3:53.28

Seeking intimacy
Being there
3:4:22.37
3:4:36.15
Greater involvement
3:4:14.51

Language and closeness
3:4:21.34
3:4:38.57

Claiming and responsibility
3:4:47.27
3:4:48.10
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Prompts for me: Why? How? Can you say more about that, tell me what you were thinking, how did you feel? Can you give an example?

Focus on specific accounts of particular experiences and associated thoughts and feelings. Encourage stories regarding what happened to them; the personal meaning of events.

1. Can you tell me a bit about your first meeting with your stepchildren and how you were introduced / or, can you tell me about discussions you had regarding the children.
2. What was your experience of first living together?
3. Can you describe your role within the family and how it changed/developed from the early days until now?
4. How did you and your partner negotiate / discuss what your input would be?
5. What expectations were there regarding your role / position? From partner, children? How did those expectations differ from your own?
6. How do you understand the contribution that have made to your family?
7. What has been most appreciated about your role?
8. How were you supported in your role?
9. How did you negotiate your authority with the children?
10. How do you understand your role alongside that of the children’s biological father?
11. Can you describe the relationship that you have with your stepchildren? How would they / your partner describe it?
12. What has influenced you in your understanding of parenting and being a step dad?

13. What does being a step dad mean to you? How do you understand the role? What have you learnt?

14. Can you describe a time when you felt most and least effective in the role?
Appendix D

Reflexive interview diary
Reflections after each interview

Carl
I felt very nervous at the start of the interview, my first one, and I am conscious of not wanting to dictate or lead it, but worried that he might talk at length about subjects unconnected with the research question. As he spoke, I wondered if Carl was attracted to women who leave the act of ‘mothering’ to men - fathers. The act of coming together to co-parent seems to be something that may be unfamiliar to him; from childhood through to his adult relationships. It seems that only one parent can emerge as the locus for what the child may need and this puts them in a pivotal but lone position.

I wondered if Joe, Carl’s stepson, was holding some of the more difficult emotions that are impossible for the adults to talk about, both within the family and with each other. He may be positioned as the one in the family who challenges, as others find this difficult to do. If Carl were to challenge his wife more, would Joe be freed up to play a different role?

I feel slightly uncomfortable with the accounts of Terri’s shortcomings as a mother. It speaks perhaps to reluctance in Carl to speak personally about his difficulties, which appear to be located in Terri. I feel my own ‘mother-blaming’ position shifting.

I am curious about Carl changing the subject twice when I attempt to speak about his family system.

Simon
Blimey, I felt that Simon took charge of the interview at the beginning and had all bases covered. He is a very articulate man, who has a story to tell and it felt as if he wanted to make sure that it was told fully, without
omissions. Important for him to get it right and to make sure that I understood it and him.

Many perspectives offered: personal, societal, racial, gender, cultural. His own experience of having a stepfather was fascinating.

I wondered how hard it might be for a partner of Simon’s to find a role alongside him – I almost felt dispensed with as the interviewer and unsure of my ability to conduct any part of our meeting.

Again I sensed a tendency for the male to locate difficulties in the partner. Is this a gender issue? Are men so socialised not to get things wrong/make mistakes that these difficulties have to be located anywhere or with anyone but them? Was I anxious to get things right and locating my difficulty with him?

Simon seems to be a fixer; a mover and a shaker. Perhaps I am more used to men adopting a one-down position, leaving family matters and its organisation to the female. Again, I have the sense that he has all bases covered. Can he receive input from others? He was running his life and that of his siblings from such a young age. How do I receive input from others? I accept it sparingly, at times.

Gendered talk? Simon speaks using professional authority and insight. Problems are handled almost managerially.

There were two emotional moments, both when he is talking about step-relationships. For a loquacious man, he becomes tongue-tied and cannot speak. Is it difficult for him to talk about this relationship? Are there the words? Are there feelings here that he cannot apply to the people he speaks about?

What does his stepfather role bring up for Simon from his own family system? I feel that I am slipping into a clinical role rather than that of interviewer at times, or am I being personally affected? Simon’s story is deeply compelling and moving. I can identify with aspects of his story and perhaps this makes it harder to maintain a professional distance. Has Simon lost some of his professional perspectives on his relationships as he speaks
so personally and openly about them? It is hard to say goodbye to him as the interview is concluded.

**Dennis**

This is a much harder interview than the previous two. Dennis is taciturn and at times monosyllabic. I feel that I am working very hard to keep it going. I have a sense that Dennis may have covert depression. I experience him as almost locked in to a narrative that fears underachievement; as if self-worth and self-esteem are determined by what you do and who you become. Is this a gender narrative?

I have a strong sense of male isolation as I listen to Dennis; of lonely men being left to sort things out and manage alone.

Is Dennis’s way of keeping a relational closeness with his stepson achieved via problem-solving talk which keeps him close to Liam as he instructs and monitors his performance? Is Dennis so taciturn because he may imagine that I am monitoring *his* performance as a stepfather?

I wonder if the couple relationship is activated by Liam’s adolescent withdrawal. Does he bring them together to parent him as he cuts off from them, in a way that didn’t happen with both of his biological parents? Is he attempting to create a different family system for himself? Or does the couple closeness leave him sullen and alone as was the case for me and my sister in our family system?

Dennis and Liam seem to unite and come together at a time of loss for Dennis. Do both feel the loss of a parent?

Emotion and feeling is kept at bay for Dennis and I feel a distance from him. When the interview concludes and I turn off the recorder, Dennis begins to speak more openly about himself. It is as if language failed him when considering the role of stepfather.
Appendix E
Extracts from my self-reflexivity diary

This study has been something of an elegiac endeavour almost from its inception. It was motivated primarily by a desire on my part to pay homage to a wonderful man, whose loving presence transformed my childhood and the relationships within it. His death brought with it the painful realisation that in his lifetime; I never told him what he had meant to me and our family and how much I loved him. My thoughts about how I had possibly undervalued him and his role lead me to consider the role of stepfathers generally and how we as a society position them.

I am concerned, given what I have said, that this study may be imbued with an overly positive slant that may overlook or seek to obscure the difficulties and complexities or perhaps even the antipathy contained within each stepfather’s account of their experience. This may be particularly pertinent as I have a tendency to position my own stepfather as the heroic rescuer of a difficult and fragmented, family system.

I need to guard against seeing the wives and partners of the men interviewed as potentially hindering of the men’s attempts to be close to their stepchildren, given that the relationship between my mother and stepfather at times felt ring fenced, with my sister and me on the outside looking in. I have always regarded this as being the result of my mother needing the constant reassurance of my stepfather, given her difficult marriage to my father. Ultimately, I would have liked my relationship with him to have felt at times, less mediated by my mother.

As a mother myself, I know how the weight of responsibility for parenting can often fall to the woman. However, my own upbringing has brought in to sharp focus for me the need for a more balanced parental dyad and as such,
my belief is that where there is a positive male presence, his role needs to be foregrounded rather than annexed. I believe that there is a societal discourse that privileges the role and contribution of the mother over that of the father but my belief is that children thrive when both parents are present, close and active in their lives. Perhaps I see this study as a desire to elevate the paternal position and where stepfathers are concerned, to bring them in from the cold.

From a clinical perspective, I know that at the primary school where I work and during my training as a systemic psychotherapist, my work with fathers would produce high levels of empathy in me as I perceived what appeared to be, at times, their struggle to be effective and to be heard. I have caught myself at times in a clinical setting, privileging the male voice in a way that I would not do in my everyday dealings with men, unless of course he is a father and presents as sidelined in any way. I have wondered if my reaction to fathers speaks to my relationship, or the lack of it, with my biological father. I am not sure that it does. My feelings of warmth and empathy and a desire for greater closeness are reserved for my stepfather, not my father. This is perhaps the reason for this study on stepfathers which is borne out of a sense of presence rather than absence.

For all of the reasons above, it may be that I lose a critical distance in my questioning of the participants. However, my discussions about this with fellow trainees, my tutor and therapist have been helpful in addressing this issue.

An example of my reflections on organising the analysis

Very moved to discover how many of these emerging themes are linked to the men’s desire for closeness and intimacy. By far, this is the biggest cluster of themes.
Gender, mother’s role and influence, understanding of role and society and cultural discourses are all fairly evenly split.

Smallest group, but it stood alone, was reference to the biological father. All the men spoke here of sadness for the loss of intimacy that comes with a biological father’s distance and absence. Two of the three spoke of the role positively and try to support the non-resident father in his relationship with child – didn’t expect that.

There are links in the research here. The search for intimacy seems to be linked to gender (male and relational closeness), gender is linked to the view of mother (maternal territory), this view informed by social and cultural norms / discourses, which inform family systems and the dynamics within, which then impact on how roles are performed and understood.

Much more research needed on how men show closeness and intimacy. How do men talk about it and understand it? How do family members encourage it or inadvertently perhaps shut it down.

**A reflection on the research process**

This is taking so long, it feels never-ending. Not sure that I can do it or complete it. When I discussed the delay in completing with my therapist, she acknowledged with me the difficulties that have obstructed my efforts, not least the bereavement. She also discussed with me my difficulty with endings. This last hurdle, this last piece of work represents an end to the ‘Tavi’ experience which has kept me organised and focused throughout the grieving process.
Self-reflexivity

I am concerned, given the elegiac motivation for this study that I may have imbued it with an overly positive slant which may obscure the difficulties and complexities or perhaps even the antipathy contained within each stepfather’s account of their experience. My systemic training allowed me to bring different perspectives to the literature and I picked up on what appears to be a somewhat sanitised view of stepfamily relations as if to compensate for the more negative research of the past.

I need to guard against seeing the wives and partners of the men interviewed as potentially hindering of the men’s attempts to be close to their stepchildren, given that the relationship between my mother and stepfather at times felt ring fenced, from my sister and me. I would have liked my relationship with him to have felt at times less mediated by my mother.

My own upbringing has brought in to sharp focus for me the need for a more balanced parental dyad and as such, my belief is that where there is a positive male presence, his role needs to be fore grounded rather than annexed. Perhaps I see this study as a desire to elevate the paternal position and where stepfathers are concerned, to bring them in from the cold.

From a clinical perspective, I know that at the primary school where I work and during my training as a systemic psychotherapist, my work with fathers would produce high levels of empathy in me as I perceived what appeared to be, at times, their struggle to be effective and to be heard. I have caught myself at times in a clinical setting, privileging the male voice in a way that I would not do in my everyday dealings with men, unless of course he is a father and presents as sidelined in any way. I have wondered if my reaction to fathers speaks to my relationship, or the lack of it, with my biological father. I am not sure that it does. My feelings of warmth and empathy and a
desire for greater closeness are reserved for my stepfather, not my father. This is perhaps the reason for this study on stepfathers which is borne out of a sense of presence rather than absence.

For all of the reasons above, it may be that I lose a critical distance in my questioning of the participants. However, my discussions about this with fellow trainees, my tutor and therapist have been helpful in addressing this issue.
## Participant 1 Interview

### 0.06
F: Carl, I was just wondering if you would tell me how you met and got involved with Terri and what you remember about your discussions regarding your respective children.

### 0.19
M: Er, [pause] Yeah, well in 1996 we, er, met at a party and I, it was clear, you know, from the start that we both had children, um, and I, I suppose looking back on things we'd probably have managed that incorporation of the children into the relationship in a very different way.

### 1.02
F: Could you, could you say more about that.

### 1.06
M: Well I, I, I think we just kind of bumbled into it really, ah, and, yeah, and I don’t think we, er, thought very carefully about how to introduce into the idea of the relationship to the children, er, um, maybe, maybe we just didn't know how to have those conversations at that stage.

### 1.36
F: Do you remember what conversations did you have.

### 1.42
M: Um, [pause] I can remember conversations around particular events, you know, when we were doing things together so, you know, there is quite early on in the relationship we took the kids to the zoo.

### 2.04
F: All three.

### 2.04
M: Yeah, all three kids, um, but I, I don't think we helped them to understand what that might mean, you know, well this is going to the zoo en famile as it were, um,

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### Initial thoughts

- Both had children
- Regret
- Parenting Styles
- Language: "Bumbled"
- Uncharted territory, lack of conversations, unsure what to say.
- Development of conversations, activities with children, including them in.

### Themes

- Inclusion
- Collaboration
- Uncharted Territory
- Joining of two parental subsystems
- Languaging the experience
- Unclear meaning
- New experience